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Prime: Linguist turned spy?

Geoffrey Arthur Prime doesn't fit the mold of the upper-crust, Oxford-educated British spy.

Nonetheless, the slightly balding, sallow-cheeked Russian linguist is the central figure in what U.S. officials are calling the biggest Soviet penetration of Western intelligence since World War II.

Indeed, the 44-year-old former employe at Britain's top-secret computerized code and cipher center — General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) — is described as "a very ordinary sort of man."

Beyond that, however, details on Prime — and his alleged crime — are difficult to come by because of the severity of Britain's Official Secrets Act. Prime Minister Margaret

Thatcher refused Wednesday to answer questions from angry members of Parliament, citing the need for privacy during "court proceedings."

The Secrets Act prohibits publication in Britain of details of Prime's life or the case.

It's known, though, that Prime has been married twice, that he has no children of his own but is stepfather to current wife Rhona's three sons. Since the arrest of her husband, she has secluded herself in Laburnam Cottage, Cheltenham, the western English town where GCHQ allegedly is located.

Son of a factory worker in the British midlands, the industrial region around Birmingham, Prime attended public school, then skipped college to join the Royal Air Force.

An RAF enlisted man, Prime presumably learned Russian during his military service and became a linguist.

Described as "quiet" and "a loner," Prime worked as a Russian translator at the Cheltenham intelligence center for 10 years before he reportedly quit "in disgust" in mid-1977 and took a job as a cab driver.

However, it was no crime as exotic as espionage that led to his undoing last summer. He was arrested in July on charges of "indecent assault" of girls aged 13 to 16 and later revealed his duties as a Soviet spy.

He was working as a wine salesman at the time of his arrest and to all outward appearances no longer put his knowledge of Russian — or his

extensive contacts — to use.

Now held in Gloucester jail, Prime probably will tell much of the inner story when he stands trial next month in London's Old Bailey, the most senior criminal court in the land.

For all the secrecy, American intelligence officials believe Prime supplied the Soviets with information even after he quit his job. The charges against him, they note, span the time he served at Cheltenham and the first four years after he quit.

Just to put Prime's activities into perspective, U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger has said the damage he did to Western security was not a "catastrophe" but "a serious breach" of security.